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U.S. Still Needs Radio for Public Diplomacy in the Internet Age

By Tom Woods, on 02 Nov 2012, [Briefing](#)

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During last week's presidential debate on foreign policy, Republican nominee Mitt Romney missed an opportunity to criticize one aspect of President Barack Obama's foreign policy that has gone largely unnoticed: the shift away from U.S. international radio broadcasting in favor of more high-tech media outlets.

The dangers of the shift were underscored by a new law spearheaded by Russian President Vladimir Putin that will ban radio broadcasting in Russia starting Nov. 10 by companies that are more than 48 percent foreign-owned. Without protest, the American station Radio Liberty -- Radio Svoboda in Russian -- has decided to comply with the law, ending its morning broadcasts after nearly 60 years on the air.

[In a Moscow Times article](#), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty President Steve Korn tried to justify the move by saying that the station is adapting to new legal realities as well as changing technology and distribution systems. He explained that Radio Liberty will instead rely on digital, Internet and social media in the hopes of reaching "young, urban and educated Russians" who "are at the forefront of change and who will lead Russia in the future."

Radio Liberty's emphasis on new media is just one example of a broader shift being implemented by Voice of America and the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), the entity responsible for all U.S.-sponsored international broadcasting. The board, appointed by the U.S. president, is seeking to greatly reduce broadcast radio in favor of the Internet and social media. However, the move overlooks the vital role that radio still plays in many parts of the world, including the United States, as Hurricane Sandy has illustrated.

In particular, highly reliable and modern radio broadcasts may still be the best bet to reach behind the electronic curtain imposed by dictators. The Obama administration's increasing reliance on Internet and satellite-based communication to reach target foreign audiences with news and to share U.S. values of democracy and freedom underestimates the ease with which unfriendly governments [can simply pull the plug on their citizens](#). For instance, in Syria, where the regime of President Bashar al-Assad has cut off access to the Internet and jammed satellite television, the opposition has been starved of news from the outside world. Knowing that Assad is increasingly isolated could help sustain their resistance. Men, women and children hiding in basements do not log onto Facebook, but they are likely to have a radio.

What's more, the administration's effort to cut or drastically reduce radio transmissions and shift toward more-modern forms of media comes at a time when China and other countries are ramping up their own use of shortwave radio programming to reach their own citizens and effectively project their messages into other parts of the world.

If the goal of U.S. public diplomacy is to inform and influence foreign publics, it does not make sense to rely too heavily on any one medium for public outreach. The traditional shortwave radio that helped liberate Soviet-dominated Europe has grown up. It is now going digital, with all the benefits of sound clarity, energy efficiency, accessibility and anti-jamming robustness that accompanies these developments. This explains in part why China is using it. In fact, no fewer than 500 million Chinese now have access to digital radio transmissions, including through their cellphones. Germany, France and much of Europe are also among the more than 40 countries expanding digital radio broadcasts.

Meanwhile, Internet penetration in many countries important to U.S. foreign policy objectives remains extremely low. In China, Russia and Iran, [Internet access stands at](#) 38.4 percent, 44.3 percent and 46.9 percent respectively. Other foreign policy hot spots for the U.S., such as Syria (19.8 percent), Pakistan (15.5 percent) and Afghanistan (4.2 percent), are even worse off.

In places like Cuba and Venezuela, where looking at the wrong thing on the Internet can land you in jail or worse, radio offers greater safety through anonymity, as listening to shortwave radio broadcasts cannot be detected or traced, unlike Internet connections. Offshore broadcasting can also guarantee America's control over communications and makes it less likely that information-controlling regimes can simply cut the lines, as the Chinese did with the Internet for six months in Xinjiang province in 2010.

The Chinese government is particularly skillful at censoring online content it finds threatening. While Beijing also dedicates millions of dollars to jamming radio broadcasts, those efforts have been less successful. According to a 2011 [BBG Language Service Review report](#) (.pdf), Voice of America's China branch has a reach of 1.1 million listeners. The 2009-2012 [Radio Industry Competition and Strategic Investment Report](#) conducted by a Chinese think tank reported that radio broadcasting covers 60.2 percent of the Chinese population, with the current radio audience estimated at 653 million. The report also found that "Shortwave radio markets in China are still very robust, with their sales averaging tens of millions of sets per year." Other research conducted by Chinese scholars says that VOA Chinese broadcasts attract more than 10 million listeners. Despite this overwhelming evidence favoring the use of radios, the BBG planned to cut its international programming within China in 2011, but a growing coalition within Congress blocked the BBG's efforts and demanded continued shortwave radio broadcasts.

Social media may mobilize young tech-savvy people in the U.S., but penetrating the electronic curtain in critical countries requires upgrades to our strategic radio broadcasting capabilities. The U.S. has been slow to recognize that it is in an escalating communications race. Modern Internet and satellite-based communications are valuable assets, but they must be complemented by reliable and equally modern digital radio capabilities.

The U.S. has an important story to share. In some parts of the world, the sheer strength of the American message will enable it to be discovered on the Internet. In less friendly places, the U.S. has an obligation to project news and values to people who otherwise would remain vulnerable to dictatorships that thrive on ignorance.

Tom Woods is a former U.S. deputy assistant secretary of state and president of Woods International LLC.

Photo: An Afghan National Police officer gives a radio to an Afghan resident, Helmand province, Afghanistan, January 2009 (U.S. Navy photo).

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